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ABSTRACT

Contrastive rhetoric (CR), the study of cultural influence on written discourse has provided educators with a way to conceptualize and address anomaly in grammatically correct English texts since its birth in the mid-1960s. The development of this notion, particularly in the past 10 years, can be characterized as evolving from a narrow, formalistic, prescriptive classroom technique to a complex, wide-ranging field of research. Evolving theories of composition, error, and particularly textuality have increased the releveance of a renewed study of CR. The results of recent research suggest that analysis of pragmatic differences across languages may be more fruitful than examining strictly formal differences. This approach in turn suggests directions and implications for the teaching of writing in cross-language settings. (VWL)

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Contrastive rhetoric: Implications of a revised approach to text

By James E. Martin

The field of ESL has traditionally been less interested in reading and writing than in orality. However, there has always been a need, particularly among educators at the secondary and tertiary levels, both in native English speaking countries and internationally, to include writing instruction in classes attended by students whose native language is not English. In this context, educators have often struggled to come to terms with the language difficulties they saw in the writing produced by their ESL student writers, the most salient of which reflect a lack of command of the morpho-syntactic system of English.

As long as writing was viewed by the ESL profession to be essentially encoded speech, the teaching of writing was considered ancillary and tended to have as its goal the written production of grammatically correct English sentences, based on sentence-bound models of syntax. Contrastive analysis or later interlanguage approaches to error could be applied to devise classroom activities which address these sentence-level errors.

I. The origins of Contrastive Rhetoric

A radical departure from the sentence-oriented approach to ESL composition instruction came in the astute realization that, although addressing sentence-level errors exhibited by ESL writers is very important, the total eradication of these errors does not necessarily result in perfectly acceptable English

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texts. This is because grammatically correct sentences obviously cannot be randomly arranged to form a text; rather, there are discourse-level or rhetorical constraints which must be considered.

It was Robert Kaplan who first observed that some grammatically correct ESL texts seem to violate native English reader expectations at the discourse level, and that native speakers of different languages make characteristic violations. His 1966 article became the first articulation of the need to address rhetorical problems in ESL texts, particularly in terms of the influence of native speaker
rhetoric. He postulated a "notion" called "contrastive rhetoric" (CR), which applied a contrastive analysis approach to rhetorical anomaly in ESL texts, claiming that rhetoric is language/culture-specific and that discourse-level anomaly is the result of negative transfer of the rhetorical patterns of the student's L1 onto the production of English texts.

Understanding the implications of Kaplan's original approach is important because it has been so influential in the field of ESL composition. Kaplan saw CR as a pedagogical tool - a way to address a teaching problem (the production of rhetorically flawed ESL texts) which he felt resulted from the negative transfer of rhetorical patterns of the native language of the writer onto the production of ESL written texts. As a result of examining a number of ESL paragraphs written by native speakers of various languages, he explains the nature of this influence by describing the typical paragraph development of Semitic languages as characterized by the use of parallelism, of Oriental languages as

indirect, and of Romance/Slavic languages as digressive. He contrasts these other rhetorics with the direct or linear development he felt characterizes written English discourse. His focus in the 1966 article (and later works, particularly his 1972 book Anatomy of Rhetoric) is pedagogical, that is, how to counter the influence of native language rhetorics on ESL text production.

II. Responses to Kaplan

There was an interesting split in responses to Kaplan's 1966 work. Many educators felt that it supplied them with a logical explanation for phenomena they encountered in their students' writing and a tool with which to address these phenomena. These educators, and other researchers interested in the implications of the notion (e.g., Carr, 1967; McLeod, 1976; Chen, 1981; Santana-Seda, 1974; Tse, 1977; Bander, 1981) tended to uncritically accept Kaplan's underlying assumptions about error (that negative transfer from the L1 accounted for all error), the composing process (that composing consists of the expression of pre-conceived ideas into correct forms), the teaching of writing (using a contrastive analysis or discorse-modes approach), and about textuality (a formalistic approach). Many others, however, seem to have ignored or even scorned the entire enterprise, particularly as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis lost support among linguists.

A consequence of the ready acceptance of CR among educators and ESL practitioners on the one hand, and lack of support for the notion by linguists on the other was that CR as a technique

of teaching ESL composition became "institutionalized" in the pedagogy of many in the profession without the development of a sound theoretical base.

III. Directions of recent research in CR

There has been a revival of interest in CR, this time from a decidedly more theoretical perspective, in the past ten years. There are several possible reasons for this revival. CR provided early insights about two general characteristics of cross-language written discourse now increasingly recognized: (1) text production and processing involve discourse-level (i.e. rhetorical) factors; and (2) values, ideologies and norms of discourse communities (i.e. culture) play an important part in shaping written discourse. The perceived relevance of these two notions has perpetuated interest in CR despite serious reservations many researchers have had about particulars (especially methodological shortcomings) of the approach.

In addition, the past decade has seen a revolutionizing reconceptualization of the nature of the composing process among native English composition theorists, described by some as a "paradigm shift" (Hairston, 1982) from "product" to "process" orientation, and increasing interest in the application of this native English composition theory and pedagogy to a revitalized field of ESL composition instruction (Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1987). As these influences have spread through the profession, ESL educators have struggled to find appropriate applications for the insights of process theory in their teaching. Many are turning with renewed interest and increased sophistication to a consider-

ation of CR.

The new interest in CR has spawned much empirical research as well as theory-building or "metarhetorical," (from Young, 1978) research. This recent research has tended to have two major foci: (1) considerations of methodological and conceptual shortcomings or problems in Kaplan's early work and (2) exploratory studies expanding the parameters of meaningful CR research.

Critiques of perceived flaws in Kaplan's original articulations of CR, such as Kaplan's contrastive analysis approach to error, his unsystematic analysis of language data, his ethnocentric characterization of English rhetorical development as "linear and direct" and non-English rhetorics as "indirect" and "digressive," and his unscientific grouping of linguistically distantly related languages into generic regional language groups have become almost obligatory features of CR articles (e.g., Hinds, 1983; Mohen & Lo, 1982; Ricento, 1985; Matalene, 1985; Piper, 1985). Conceptual and methodological flaws notwithstanding, current researchers pointing out these problems tend to concentrate their criticism on Kaplan's very early work, failing to take into consideration the complexification and evolution his work has undergone in the two and a half decades since his original articulation of CR (e.g., 1976, 1982, 1987, 1988).

The exploration and expansion of CR as a field is a more constructive direction of recent research. Approches such as the use of non-English native language data, explorations of the applicability of a variety of text analysis instruments, analysis of texts of a variety of genres, discussion of the effects of prior composition instruction, and postulations about sources of

cultural norms point to the increasingly sophisticated and complex nature of the conceptualizations of the task of CR research that current researchers are bringing to their work (e.g., Jenkins & Hinds, 1987; Connor & Lauer, 1988; Carlson, 1988; Grabe, 1987). Much recent research combines the critical and exploratory foci.

Another way to conceptualize the direction of recent CR research is to consider it as evolving from "narrow" to "broad" in scope. This distinction is analogous to the one made between the "strong" and "weak" articulations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which seeks to describe the relationship between culture and language, and was influential in Kaplan's early work. The strong version of this theory posits that a person's native language determines his or her perception, world view and cognition, while the weak version says the native language strongly influences, but does not necessarily determine them.

Similarly, a narrow definition of CR would be one which postulates that the rhetorical organization of L2 written texts is the result of the transfer of L1 rhetorical organization, that there are a finite number of rhetorical forms for any language, and that these forms are discoverable by analysis of written texts. A somewhat deterministic attitude toward text production is implied, in that L2 texts are seen as native language rhetoric expressed in second language words and sentences. That is to say, the native language rhetoric of the writer determines the rhetorical organization of the second language texts he or she writes.

The broad view of CR would postulate that L1 rhetorical norms and strategies, while undoubtedly influential for the shape of L2 texts, are but one factor influencing text shape; other factors might include all sorts of interlingual, cultural and developmental issues. It also might question the premise that rhetorics of languages can be discovered simply by the analysis of written texts.

An important (perhaps the central) aspect of the distinction between narrow and broad articulations of CR is their underlying approach to textuality; that is, the way text is defined, described, and analyzed. This is because the entire enterprise of CR has been based on the assumption that it is possible to make discoveries about the rhetoric of a language on the basis of an analysis of texts written by native speakers of that language. Consequently, the way researchers have defined text has at least partially determined the analysis instruments they have used, and colored the interpretation of the results of the application of those instruments.

A distinction can be made between "formalistic" and "interactive" conceptualizations of text. A formalistic view of text equates text with written configuration; that is, text is defined as a physical structure. In a formalistic view of text, only text-based features are relevant to systematic analysis. In sum, there is a tendency to accept the notion of "textual automomy" (Nystrand, 1986)-- that is, the semantic/ontological completeness of the decontextualized written text. That is to say, meaning is "contained" in the text itself. Narrow conceptualizations of CR tend to promote a formalistic view of text.

In contrast, an interactive view of text involves factors relevant to the contextual environment of the written text (e.g., authorial intention, cultural and/or educational background of the writer, intended use of the written text, reader response to the written text, the relationship of the written configuration to a theory of text production, and others). This approach sees text as an interactive, dynamic, communicative process rather than simply a physical structure (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981), a "dialogic" interchange between reader and writer similar in some ways to oral discourse (Nystrand, 1986; Bakhtin, 1981). In this view, as Widdowson (1984) puts it, "meaning is not contained in texts; it is a function of the discourse that is created from the text by the interactive procedures" (p. 513). Broad articulations of CR are more likely to reflect interactive views of text.

Early studies of CR tended to reflect narrow conceptualizations of CR. They often applied some sort of analysis instrument (such as cohesion or coherence instruments) to short paragraphs in English written by native speakers of various languages and postulated rhetorical patterns of these non-English native languages which they saw reflected in the ESL texts. Quantification of the results was sometimes attempted. Often, researchers tried to "prove" or "disprove" a narrow articulation of the CR notion (e.g., Wang & Earle, 1972; Abuhamdia, 1972; Santiago, 1970; Okamura, 1976).

As theories of text, error, composition and culture have evolved over the past 25 years, researchers have brought new aspects of these theories to bear on their CR research while

continuing to search for and describe the influence of culture and language on written discourse. The general direction of the resulting research has been a broadening, both in terms of the exploration of an increasing number of relevant fields, aspects and features, and in terms of a questioning of the philosophical underpinnings of narrow articulations of CR.

As a general rule, narrow articulations of CR have fared rather badly as a result of recent research, but broad articulations of CR have been generally supported (Martin, 1989). There seems to be little question of whether native language and culture influences written discourse in the second language; the current quest is to discover the nature and sources of this influence.

IV. Implications of recent CR research

The revival of interest in CR is still going strong. It is likely that the current broadening of scope and exploration will continue. Research examining cross-language written discourse of many types, using many different instruments, incorporating a variety of approaches will most likely continue to be carried out. Most importantly, increased attention will probably be made to developing the theoretical base of the field. In fact, Kaplan himself issued a call for theory building in an influential 1988 article, and this call is beginning to be answered.

As interesting as an overview of CR research might be, it is the implications the field has for teaching writing that are most relevant to educators. Since its birth in 1966, CR has always been primarily related to defining, describing, and addressing a

pedagogical need. In fact, CR is much less a theory than a teaching approach, and this has resulted in a certain unbalance between theory and practice. Unlike Generative-transformational grammar, for example, a theory that educators struggled for some time to apply to the classroom, CR has often been thought of as a classroom technique struggling to define itself theoretically.

Early, narrow articulations of CR had immediate, direct application to the classroom. Kaplan's early work, and some that followed in the late sixties and early seventies, directed educators to analyze their students' writing and contrast the rhetorics of the native languages of their ESL students with that of English. More often, however, they tended to accept the tentative descriptions of non-English rhetorics Kaplan made in 1966 as proven fact and then teach presumed English rhetorical structures (e.g., the modes of discourse such as description, comparison/contrast, definition, etc.) in order to replace non-English forms with these English rhetorical structures.

As a result of the recent questioning of the premise that a finite number of formal text shapes or rhetorical patterns exist for any language and the reassessing of our understanding of the composing process and of textuality, the contrastive-analysis, discourse-modes approach to teaching composition suggested by early CR research has been challenged by many recent theorists as being too narrow and product oriented (e.g., Piper, 1985).

In fact, recent CR studies have not succeeded in discovering and describing characteristic, language-specific rhetorical patterns in non-English languages which can be contrasted with characteristic English and non-English patterns. They have,

however, tended to find that there are indeed significant differences among rhetorics across cultures and that these differences seem to be culture-specific, or at least culturally preferred. Written texts no doubt reflect these differences, but they are primarily pragmatic (i.e., related to non-conventional aspects of language, such as differences differences in writer strategies regarding such factors as explicitness, organization and tone) which are the sources of writer choice-making of content and surface forms, rather than differences in monolithic culture-specific text shapes or rhetorical patterns.

It is unfortunate and certainly inconvenient that the insights offered by recent CR research do not suggest a set of simple, direct applications to the teaching of ESL writing in the way that the earlier, narrow articulations of the notion did. However, this does not mean that CR currently has nothing to offer the teacher of writing. Despite their similarities, ESL composition instruction does differ in significant ways from its native English counterpart. Contrastive rhetoric can be used to exploit this difference by examining the pragmatics of discourse and notions of correctness or appropriateness of native writers from different cultures. Culturally-preferred aspects such as implicitness and explicitness, clarity and coherence, unity, choice of content, personal voice, and other pragmatic concerns are relevant to this kind of contrastive analysis. By examining the notions of correctness and appropriateness of these and other textual concerns as they understand them to be reflected in their own native language, ESL writers will be able to construct

similar notions about their writing in English. Obtaining native English speakers' feedback about these issues would also help ESL writers to make appropriate choices when writing in English to native English audiences. Notions of pragmatic appropriateness could also be explored for various established regional English communities.

Recent research in CR affirms that pragmatics underlying writer choice-making differ across languages, and that native language norms often do seem to influence choices made when writing in English. By moving away from formalistic notions of characteristic language-specific text forms that dictate L2 text shapes and moving toward an understanding of the pragmatic differences among languages and how they might influence ESL writing, CR research can help theorists and educators understand the cultural basis of notions of contextualized appropriateness of written discourse and confront communication difficulties which seem to be caused by these differing notions of appropriateness across cultures.

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